

VZCZCXRO2981  
RR RUEHCD RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHSR  
DE RUEHSK #0141/01 0411414  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 101414Z FEB 06  
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3743  
INFO RUCNOSC/ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN EUROPE  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000141

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: Belarusian Athletes to Win, If They Know What Is Good For Them

Ref: 04 Minsk 1280

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On January 24, Belarus' chief Olympic coach Aleksandr Popov announced the names of athletes who would attend the Turin Olympic Games. Athletes in the past have suffered from stress-related illnesses or left the country altogether because of government pressure to win. Aleksei Aidarov, for example, is a biathlon champion and bronze medallist who reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown in January, leaving doubt as to whether he would participate in the Turin Olympics. As many Olympians have come to find out, failing to meet the GOB's and President's expectations can be their biggest defeat. End Summary.

Where Is The Medallist?

¶2. (U) The following anecdote typifies the pressure Belarusian athletes face. On January 24, two weeks before the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Belarus' chief Olympic coach Aleksandr Popov revealed the list of Belarusian athletes who would be competing. Surprisingly, Belarus' best biathlon athlete, 31-year-old Aleksei Aidarov, was not on the list. Aidarov, a bronze medallist at the 1998 Nagano Olympics, unexpectedly left his team during the January 12 Biathlon World Cup in Italy and returned to Minsk without providing any explanation. Minister of Sports Aleksandr Grigorov disclosed to journalists on January 24 that Aidarov had suffered a serious mental breakdown due to "overstrain and pressure."

Aidarov "Gently Persuaded" to Compete?

¶3. (U) In an interview with the independent newspaper Belorusski Novosti on February 1, Grigorov reported that he and the chair of the Belarusian Biathlon Federation Stepan Sukhorenko (who is also head of the BKGB) met Aidarov shortly after his unexpected arrival in Minsk. [Comment: A meeting that undoubtedly calmed Aidarov.] After a 40-minute meeting, Grigorov and Sukhorenko concluded that Aidarov should continue with his training and compete in the Olympics. According to Grigorov, Aidarov will fly to Italy to join his team because he had "every right" to take part in the Olympics and was on the National Olympic Committee list. However, Grigorov noted the level of Aidarov's participation would depend on his health and the decision of his coach. The Sports Minister hoped that time with his family in Minsk would help Aidarov overcome his problems and win another medal.

GOB Pressure Intensifies

¶4. (U) Although Sports Minister Grigorov claimed to consider the act of "medal planning" unprofessional and traumatic to the athletes, it has effectively become one of the GOB's tools to measure Belarus', and particularly Lukashenko's, prestige at home and abroad. However, unlike in 2004, Lukashenko has not yet

ordered his Olympic team to win a set number of medals (reftel). First Vice President of the National Olympic Committee Gennady Alekseyanko noted that the Olympic Games coincided with a "very important" political campaign [presidential elections] and claimed that the President had done a great deal to raise athletes' abilities. According to Alekseyanko, the success of Belarusians at the Olympics would be used as political capital for Lukashenko: "We [Belarusians] will vote for him [Lukashenko] with our results." According to Alekseyanko, the athletes would not have the traditional send-off celebration because it would distract the athletes from their training.

¶5. (U) The Sports Ministry predicts that the men's and women's biathlon teams will earn medals, as well as skier Yelena Zubrilova and free stylists Dmitri Daschinskiy, Aleksei Grishin, Alla Tsuper, and Assol Skivets. Sergey Dolidovich would place within the top eight in ski racing. [Note: Speed skater Angelica Kotyuga will not participate because she failed a drug test.]

Comment

-----

¶6. (SBU) Belarusian Olympians face great pressure from the authorities to bring home medals for national prestige and for the ego of Belarus' ultimate sports fanatic, President Lukashenko. Before the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, the President demanded his athletes win 25 medals and was outraged when they brought home only ¶15. Julia Nesterenka, a sprinter and gold medallist in the 2004 Athens Games, fell ill from stress following the games and spent a month in a hospital. Apparently, she was too sick to meet with Lukashenko. Belarusian athletes are used for politically-charged billboards and advertisements throughout Minsk and it is clear that their Olympic glory quickly becomes Lukashenko's. Consequently, for Belarusian athletes, it is not a wise decision to come home

MINSK 00000141 002 OF 002

from the Olympics empty-handed. Lukashenko's comments at a January 9 hockey tournament served as a warning for Belarusian Olympians who return without medals: "[Belarusian athletes] should feel shamed if they don't cheer our people with excellent results. We have done everything possible for them. That is why we are expecting good results."

KROL